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ABSTRACT

Projecting the future for the rural youth of America, the paper examined the problems and needs of this group. Rural youth, for the most part economically, socially, and educationally disadvantaged, were not found to be chaffing at the bit to enter the value configurations and behavioral patterns of "Consciousness III". They are still very much imbued with a strong desire to achieve higher social rank, more material amenities, and to improve their basic life chances. Although there is great heterogenity along a number of dimensions among those that might be labeled rural youth, there are also some common attributes of circumstances, values, aspirations, needs, and prospects that cut across the majority of these diverse groups: most are at a relative disadvantage to compete with metropolites, most have high mobility aspirations, and most lack facilitation of any kind to accomplish their goals. Two publications which listed many of the needs for changing rural schools were cited: "Rural Education and the Educational Occupational Attainments of Youth" (Haller) and "Vocational Education in Rural Areas" (Griessman and Densley). The need for strong, well organized cooperation between Federal, state, and local governments was also stressed. Eight institutional structures impeding the possibility of innovative changes in counseling, training, and occupational placement of rural people were given, along with 4 structures that should be established to replace these. (KM)

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RURAL YOUTH IN THE SEVENTIES: PROBLEMS AND NEEDS*

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INTRODUCTION

America is not being "greened" in a smooth and even manner. Reality is painted somewhat differently (perhaps with a more ragged brush) than Charles Reich would have us believe in his book, The Greening of America. Rural youth, for the most part disadvantaged in economic support, social experiences, and educational background, are not chaffing at the bit to enter the value configurations and behavioral patterns of "Consciousness III." They are still very much imbued with a strong desire to achieve higher social rank, more material amenities, and to improve their basic life chances. This is what the results of current research lead me to believe exists and what is likely to exist for the near-future ("The Seventies"). I asked a number of my colleagues specializing in problems of youth to project the trends of values and behavior of rural young people and they appear to be in strong agreement with me.[1]

It is difficult to generalize broadly over the vast array of different populations and subcultures included in the gross category rural youth. And for a Rural Sociologist, with his bare-faced empirical tendencies (at least this one) it is even more difficult to speculate in a grand, general manner. Yet, I agree with the implicit assumption providing the rationale for this conference -- that it is important that we do so. Although there is great heterogenity along a number of dimensions among those that might be labeled rural youth, there are also some common attributes of circumstances, values,

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[1] Eli Ginzberg (Columbia University), George Ohlendorf (University of Wisconsin), Lee Coleman (University of Kentucky), Norval Glenn (University of Texas), Walter Slocum (Washington State University), Steve Picou (Louisiana State University).

aspirations, needs, and prospects that cut across the majority of these diverse groups (i.e. Chicanos, Blacks, hill-country whites, Cajuns, American Indians, and open-country poor in the northeast, midwest, and west): Most are at a relative disadvantage to compete -- and that is the name of the game -- with metropolites, most have high mobility aspirations, and most lack facilitation of any kind to accomplish their goals. In addition, like all other youth, these rural young are bugged by the age-old problem of transition into adult status (i.e., sex relations, drinking and/or drug usage, and conflict with the older establishment of the community, including parents).

RURAL YOUTH'S WANTS AND NEEDS

What do rural youth want?

(1) They want a richer material and social life than their parents. They desire the middle-class life style represented in TV commercials and family comedies.

(2) They want quality education beyond high school and, in most cases, through a college degree.

(3) They want prestige, white collar jobs or, at least, a skilled trade.

(4) They want more money than their parents could produce and more income security.

(5) They want to move to or near the metropolitan centers for the services and cultural diversity offered there.

(6) They want to be able to realize their relatively conservative values and interpretation of moral norms without ridicule.

In other words, they are becoming more like metropolitan youth in their values and aspirations and probably, also, in their behavioral patterns. This is one point that almost all my forementioned colleagues agree upon.

Having visited with a variety of rural youth in the course of my investi-

gations and as a result of invitations to speak to student groups, I am certain that most rural adolescents of high school age still rank highest in their primacy of concerns the problems of boy-girl relations, parental and generational conflict, ego security, and such deviant behavior (for the young) as drinking and grass. Yet, they apparently find difficulty in seeking useful advice and guidance on these matters. They express a strong need for this kind of guidance. This felt need is likely to go largely unmet for most of these youth through the seventies unless adaptive structures are created in their communities.

I do not pretend that the same kind of problems do not exist for many, if not most, metropolitan youth living outside the more affluent suburban areas. But, much more attention (experimental efforts) are being directed toward resolving these problems for the youth of metropolitan America.

Next I will turn to some suggestions for what needs to be done for rural youth in the seventies. As I have reached the conclusion that the most important perceived problems of the majority of rural youth focus on the problem of facilitating social mobility and finding assistance in resolving personal social problems, I will stress the need to examine the structures of rural education as the most pressing need in assisting them.

SUGGESTIONS FOR POLICY AND ACTION

A substantial number of publications have evolved over the last ten yearsproviding a wealth of ideas on changes needed in rural school organization, vocational counseling, and vocational training programs to assist people in bringing about their ambitious projections for social mobility. The two most recent of these reports, published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, are particularly interesting. Archie Haller (University of Wisconsin) in the publication entitled Rural Education and the Educational Occupational Attainments of Youth lists a set of general comprehensive needs: the need for massive financial support from federal and state governments to provide effective counseling and training programs for rural youth; the development of an awareness that programs of effective guidance and provision of social support are equally as important as facilities; and the need to train people to utilize the motivational and information resources that already exist in providing guidance and training for rural youth. The report by Griessman and Densley entitled, Vocational Education in Rural Areas provides a more comprehensive and detailed examination of suggestions for improving counseling and vocational education opportunities for rural youth. These authors cover quite well a broad range of ideas directed toward such things as curriculum, school consolidation (including development of specialized area and regional schools), mobile vocational units, advisory councils, work experience programs, counseling programs, and needs in teacher education. I strongly recommend these two reports to anyone interested in exploring ways to further the interests of rural youth.

It would be presumptuous and of little utility for me to offer suggestions for specific structures and techniques in reference to vocational counseling and training of disadvantaged rural youth. What I intend to do is to view this problem from a broad sociological perspective and offer for your consideration general implications at two levels: suggestions for needs in collaboration and cooperation between certain subsystems of the larger society, and high priority needs for broadly reorganizing certain structures of rural education to better serve the needs of rural youth and adults.

Needs for Cooperation

We need to think big in orienting ourselves toward the solution of the problems facing disadvantaged rural people in gaining a productive and satisfying life. A more advantageous time for seeking broad support for melioration of this problem has probably never existed. We are dealing with a problem that has broad ramifications for all the people and areas of our society and one that is finally becoming recognized by the public at large. There is no need to take a narrow, provincial orientation toward this problem, for the interests of urban dwellers as well as people in the hinterland are involved. Rural people are not happy with the progressive depopulation their communities have experienced, nor are urban dwellers pleased with either the magnitude or quality of the rural migrants. Obviously the flow of the disadvantaged from the rural South, particularly Negroes, into major metropolitan centers, which continues unabated, has contributed greatly to the general and critical stresses our nation faces today. The touchstone of the solution to many of these problems lies with the quality and effectiveness of rural education structures, regardless of whether the bulk of the rural poor continue to

migrate to large urban centers or whether we assume that this trend can be reversed. In either case, it is to the advantage of rural areas, the metropolitan centers, the nation as a whole, and certainly to the individuals involved to improve the prospects of social mobility for the rural disadvantaged. As Archie Haller and others have pointed out, probably the first requisite is the need for a national policy on rural education with a special emphasis on the disadvantaged. I concur with Haller's judgment that "-- we need a single overall educational policy for rural regions, rural ethnic groups, and rural peripheries of urban areas -- a long range program for improving rural education with special but coordinated emphasis for different regions and ethnic groups." The enactment of such a national policy would bring about a widespread awareness of the magnitude of this problem and provide legitimation for giving it top priority for action and, derivatively, legitimation for the mass input of financial resources needed. This is not just a problem of local or county units or even a problem of just rural areas. It is a national and state problem. Consequently, we should expect and seek massive federal and state assistance in providing the heavy investments of resources needed to materially effect this problem. Strong, well organized cooperation between federal, state, and local governments is a requisite for implementation of a policy that will have any kind of impact on this situation.

In addition, we need to creatively orient ourselves toward breaking down the provincial community orientation that tends to prevail in rural areas of the South and other regions so that new, innovative, cooperative structures might be established between and among rural schools within counties, areas, and regions to better utilize scarce resources in developing the potential of

rural people. This would also facilitate the development of cooperative programs of job placement and social adjustment that need to be build between rural and urban political units.

I do not kid myself about the difficulty of accomplishing the aforementioned objectives. These will be difficult to accomplish; however, they are necessary prerequisites to any kind of a general and enduring solution to the problems we face in rural human resource development. Another form of cooperation that might facilitate the accomplishment of these ends, and is very often overlooked in statements of needs pertaining to rural education, involves the relationships existing between social scientists, on one hand, and policy makers and educators, on the other. There is a need for more effective and continuous communication and collaboration among these groupings of professionals in order to realize a commonly held objective of improving the prospects for self-realization and social development of disadvantaged rural people. There is an obvious mutual advantage in carrying out the particular professional roles involved through the information that would be exchanged through improved communication and dialogue. In addition to this, and perhaps more significant in the short-run, is the increased power that would be marshalled through cooperative associations of these professionals relative to influencing the development and implementation of a comprehensive national policy. The efforts of agencies such as the ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education in Small Schools (New Mexico State University) and the ERIC Clearinghouse at the Center for Vocational and Technical Education (Ohio State University) have made a beginning in this direction. But, these efforts are not sufficient to build the kind of intimate and continuous working bonds

we need to get the job done. We need a systematic and intensive effort to begin sharing ideas and collaborating on programs through joint sessions of our professional associations -- first at the national level and then at progressively less complex levels of organization (i.e., retional, state, and local). We need to work toward establishing more effective ties in our day-to-day working relationships as well -- both within universities and colleges and between these systems and the rural school systems.

A hairy and sensitive problem involving cooperation of a different order is present in the rural South and Southwest -- that between racial and ethnic groupings of the populations involved. To ignore the critical aspect of this problem is utter foolishness, for no long-run solution to the problems of aiding the rural disadvantaged can be accomplished until we reverse the trend toward increasing tension and conflict between these groupings. We need to face up to this problem in a direct and honest way, to examine its dimensions closely, and to come up with programs and organizational structures that will overcome local and regional prejudices and discriminatory practices in both education and employment, without producing mutual distrust and disaffection. This is a large order, but one that will not wait.

Change in Rural Educational and Counseling Structures

In considering the needs for changes in educational structures in particular rural areas, there is a need to face up to the complexity of the problem and resist the notion that there is an easy or simple solution, (i.e. generally raising aspirations, better facilities, or better teachers). We must work across a number of fronts simultaneously to have any hope of success.

First, I think it is necessary to seek out institutionalized structures impeding the possibility of innovative changes in counseling, training, and occupational placement of rural people. Some of these that, in my judgement are most important and must be altered, are as follows:

1. The sanctity of the concept of the local community school and total local domination over the ends and programs of education.

2. The tendency to put local community interests ahead of the felt needs and objectives of the rural youth.

3. The tendency to maintain Vocational Agriculture as the most important vocational program for adolescent boys.

4. The tendency to neglect or give low priority to the need for comprehensive and intensive guidance programs, including career counseling and job placement.

5. The tendency to be satisfied with teachers who can be recruited at low salaries and the utilization of locally available, partially or poorly trained individuals as teachers.

6. The lack of concern for the development of a broad, continuous educational program beyond adolescence geared to adult needs and desires.

7. The lack of concern with perceived needs and objectives of the new generation in planning curricula. (Generation Gap)

8. The almost total lack of a systematic broad counseling service for youth in rural areas outside of the vocationally oriented structures in the school. (Problems of sex, drugs, and other anxieties go unresolved for most rural young.)

All of these changes will be difficult to bring about and will take time. We need to begin developing research, experimental programs, and knowledge diffusion toward these ends now.

Once change is possible, with some probability of success in implementation, priority should be given to establishing the following types of structures:

1. The development of a comprehensive program aimed a total human resource development, which will integrate vocational and personal counseling, development of educational options, placement in educational and vocational programs, and job placement.

2. To develop in the long-run programs to train counselors to operate this comprehensive guidance function -- people trained to utilize information on youth's ambitions, abilities and skills, labor market needs and restrictions, and job placement techniques. In the short-run present teaching staffs should be encouraged to do graduate work in counseling related areas and new teachers selected on their training and ability in student guidance.

3. To place an emphasis on education aimed at self-realization of the individual rather than on standardized, routinized processing of aggregates through school routines aimed at producing diplomas. Increase the opportunity for changing programs, provide highly personalized and individual student guidance, and structure opportunities for students to test their notions about life preferences in real situations.

4. Build more diversified programs aimed at preparing all youth for additional education after high school, including vocational training. Develop adult vocational programs structured to pick up where high school training leaves off, and specialized ones to serve the drop-out.

Obviously a good deal of carefully structured experimentation coupled with honest evaluative research will be required to find the best ways of accomplishing these ends and others that may prove more worthwhile.

I am convinced that we need changes in our modes of socializing rural youth, most of whom are disadvantaged, and soon, if our society is not to evolve into a form of rigid stratification none of us want. I think the fact that this conference exists, and that those of you here took the trouble to come, is evidence to the fact of our desire to discover options and provide answers. But all the talk in the world won't do the job -- the proof is in the pudding, so to speak, and we must influence the chefs.